East-West Comparative Studies: A Challenge and an Opportunity

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In reflecting on my own knowledge of a field of study in comparative literature, I recall an interesting experience in my teaching career some thirty years ago, when I taught a sophomore tutorial, a required undergraduate course designed to introduce to a group of American students the basic ideas of literary studies. Early in my syllabus, I asked my students to read Plato's seventh letter, in which the philosopher argues, using "circle" as an example—circle as a name, a description, an image, a concept and, finally, as a pure idea—that everything can be divided into five categories, of which only the fifth, the pure idea, is the "actual object of knowledge which is the true reality."[1] The real point, however, is Plato's dismissal of language, especially writing, as totally inadequate in expressing that true reality. "Hence no intelligent man," he declares, "will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable—which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols."[2] Side by side with Plato, I put a passage from the Chinese book of *Zhuangzi*, in which the Daoist thinker also speaks of a circle (or more precisely a wheel,

which is a sort of circle), and the inadequacy of language. “What can be seen in looking at things are shapes and colors; and what can be heard in listening are names and sounds,” says Zhuangzi (369?–286? BCE), making a distinction between what can be perceived in the phenomenal world and what should be seen as the essence of things, and he complains that most people fail to grasp the essence or the true reality: “It is sad that the world should suppose that shapes, colors, names, and sounds are sufficient to reveal the true reality of things.” Instead of analyzing things in an elaborate taxonomy of categories, Zhuangzi tells the story of a wheelwright who was making a wheel in front of the hall where Duke Huan was reading. The wheelwright asked the Duke what sort of words his lordship was reading, and the Duke replied, “Words of the sages.” He then asked: “Are the sages alive?” “They are dead,” said the Duke. Then the wheelwright told the Duke right up front that the book he was reading contained “nothing but the dregs of the ancients!”[3] The Duke was not at all pleased that a wheelwright should be so audacious as to comment on his reading, and he demanded an explanation. The wheelwright then said that he had been making wheels for seventy years and the knack of making a perfect wheel was something he couldn’t put in words. “I can’t even teach it to my son, and my son can’t learn it from me,” he said. “The ancients and what they could not pass on to posterity are all gone, so what you are reading, my lord, is nothing but the dregs of the ancients!”[4] In this allegory of the wheelwright, Zhuangzi expresses the idea that language, particularly written language, is inadequate, and that the true reality of things is ineffable.

Plato’s letter with its differentiation of categories, analysis, and reasoning takes the form of a logical argument with which my students were familiar. The anecdotal story Zhuangzi told with a vivid dialogue, however, was quite a novelty for them as an argument, though with the help of explanations, its meaning was not difficult

for them to grasp. The form of Zhuangzi's argument, however, is so different from that of Plato's that a student asked me in genuine perplexity: "You mean this is philosophy?" Here, I think, is a question that epitomizes both the challenge of East-West comparative studies and the opportunity and potential values it offers. That is of course a question I very much intended for my students to ask, because they already knew Zhuangzi in that passage was talking about the inadequacy of language, a point Plato was making in the seventh philosophical letter. The question that student asked, therefore, does not so much challenge the nature of the Zhuangzi text as a form of philosophy as it does the conventional notion of philosophical discourse, or the generic notion of a discourse we call philosophy.

But let us take that student's question literally and ask about the difference between Plato and Zhuangzi, between Plato's abstract notion of the pure idea and Zhuangzi's story about the "knack" of making a wheel, a concrete object. In philosophical terms, this looks like a difference between what Plato would call theoretical "knowledge" (*episteme*) and a practical skill or "craft" (*techne*). In Book 4 of the *Republic*, Plato made a distinction between the two by arguing that the knowledge to govern a city well is different from any of the crafts a city may have, of which the first he mentioned is carpentry, that "a city is not to be styled wise because of the deliberations of the science of wooden utensils for their best production."[5] And yet each of the crafts he mentioned—carpentry, architecture, metalworking, and agriculture—are also called "science" or "knowledge" that serves a specific purpose. In *Statesman*, Plato compares "the art of government" to the practical skill and knowledge of medical doctors as a "disinterested scientific ability," in which "we see the distinguished mark of true authority in medicine—and of true authority everywhere else as well."[6] Perhaps we may say that for Plato, practical skill or craft (*techne*) may have a limited scope of usefulness or functionality, while the knowledge (*episteme*) of governing may take the city as a whole in its purview;

the two concepts may thus generate some tension between them as part and whole, but it would be a mistake to regard them as opposed to one another in an absolute dichotomy. In Plato, *episteme* and *techne* have a more complicated dialectic relationship than the simple opposition we sometimes find in modern interpretations.

It would also be a mistake to take Plato and Zhuangzi to be representatives of two fundamentally different "ways of thinking" in an opposition between Greek abstraction and Chinese concreteness. If Plato's discussion of various crafts leads to an understanding of theoretical knowledge, Zhuangzi's allegory of the wheelwright is likewise meant to illustrate a philosophical point, the same point Plato makes in his seventh philosophical epistle, namely, language's inadequacy to express true reality. Chinese philosophers, too, have their share of abstract notions. The concept of *dao* in Laozi and Zhuangzi is abstract, shapeless, nameless, and unnamable, as Laozi puts it, "I do not know its name, so perforce call it *dao*."[7] The ideas of *yin* and *yang*, the Daoist concept of *wu* or "nothingness," and the Buddhist idea of *sunyata* or "emptiness" are all abstract, and the hexagrams in *I Ching* or the *Classic of Changes* are mysterious abstract signs with a plurality of meanings to be interpreted in various ways. Zhuangzi's story may be concrete, but what the story points to is something abstract. After comparing Plato's letter with Zhuangzi's allegorical story, my students should have a different view from their earlier notion of the form of philosophical discourse and become more flexible in their understanding and more capacious in their knowledge. Such questioning, discussing, and comparing, I would argue, constitute the very process of the formation of knowledge, or what the Germans call *Bildung.* By questioning our received notions of what counts as philosophy or poetry or literature, we break out of the cocoons of our conventional understanding, expand our horizons, and become more open-minded and more receptive of the forms and concepts that come from different cultures and traditions, which are nevertheless commensu-

rable and can be brought into meaningful comparisons. In so doing, we learn to move beyond our inborn limitations and parochialism toward a more cosmopolitan perspective, become more knowledgeable and more appreciative of the diversity and richness of human thinking and human creativity. And that, I would argue, is the value of comparative studies, the effect of reading across cultures.

In reading the group of essays included in this inaugural issue of *KNOW*, I am struck by how much resonance there is in our discussions of the forms and formation of knowledge, and in discussions of big cross-cultural, comparative issues, as Geoffrey Lloyd puts it, of "the unity of humankind" and of "our diversity." Francesca Rochberg's essay on ancient Assyro-Babylonian cuneiform knowledge shows a fascinating way of structuring knowledge of the heavenly bodies without reference to nature or the physical laws of causality, thus a form of knowledge that challenges the concept of science. But the challenge also provides an opportunity to "allow for and integrate such differences," and to form a new understanding of science and its history. "Alterity," as Lloyd also remarks, "is not a threat, rather an opportunity."

Understanding a text from a culture very different from our own always poses a challenge, but it can also be an exhilarating experience that transforms us, enriches us, and makes us better educated and better, at least potentially, in an ethical sense of having greater capacity for sympathetic understanding. That is what our world needs, particularly at the present time, and that may explain the emphasis on ethics in contemporary philosophy and literary studies. Kwame Anthony Appiah regards the core of cosmopolitanism as the principle that "no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other."[8] Reading across different literatures and cultures is a very good way to encounter what is different from us and to cultivate our sense of moral responsibilities to other human beings. Appiah mentions a "famous analogy" proposed

by Peter Singer to illustrate the moral principle with a hypothetical situation:

> "If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out," Singer wrote. "This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing."[9]

This is interesting because here we find a Western philosopher using a mini-narrative or story to make a philosophical argument, which is essentially not so different from the way Zhuangzi told the story of the wheelwright in making his argument. For that student of mine, this could serve as a good example to show that analogy or storytelling can be a form of philosophy in the West as well. In fact, Plato himself has the famous allegory of the cave in his major work, *Republic*.[10] But Singer's mini-narrative is interesting for yet another reason. Appiah has some doubts about what he calls the "Singer principle," and one problem he has is "that our conviction that we should save the drowning child doesn't by itself tell us *why* we should do so."[11] By an uncanny coincidence, Singer's analogy sounds almost like a reiteration of an analogy of which the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius (371?–289? BCE) availed himself in arguing for an inherently good human nature, and in a way Mencius had anticipated the *why* question Appiah raised. Mencius believed that all human beings are by nature good and therefore naturally compassionate, and he used the analogy of saving a drowning child to make his point:

> Now upon seeing, all of a sudden, a child about to fall into a well, everyone would feel horrified and compassionate not because one would want to make friends with the child's parents, not because one would want to make a reputation among neighbors and friends, nor because one hates to hear the child crying. From this we may

> conclude that he who does not have a heart of compassion is not human.[12]

Mencius lived more than two thousand years before Peter Singer, and their texts are separated by huge gaps in place and cultural backgrounds, and yet they are astonishingly similar in using the image of a drowning child to make a compelling point about natural instinct and moral behavior. Such unexpected affinities of drastically different and yet commensurable texts from the East and the West are the stuff for East-West comparative studies, which provide evidence of our common and shared humanity despite linguistic, cultural, historical, political, and other kinds of differences. Like the Greek concept of *phusis*, Mencius understood "nature" as something inborn, growing within a human being as a given in life. When he argues that human beings are "by nature good," he compares human nature to something that happens by nature, of necessity—the flow of water. "Human nature is as necessarily good as water necessarily comes down," says Mencius. "There is no man who is not good, just as there is no water that does not run downward."[13] So the reason why a man should save a drowning child is determined by the inborn compassion a man necessarily has, which comes as naturally as water running down from a higher point to a lower one, an act that happens automatically and unconsciously, rather than a conscious and deliberate calculation of gains or benefit.

Mencius argues that the four cardinal virtues—compassion, the sense of shame, of reverence, and of right and wrong—are "four roots" in the human being as congenital and inborn as the four limbs of the human body. That may partially explain why in his argument for the universality of good human nature, he heavily relies on bodily analogies, metaphors, and specific instances of taste and other sensory perceptions rather than abstract a priori conceptualizations. Mencius says:

> All palates have the same taste in flavor; all ears have the same preference of sound; and all eyes have the same appreciation of beauty. When it comes to the heart, how can it alone have nothing in common? What is in common of all hearts? That's reason and rightness. The sage has first got what my heart also desires as the common; therefore reason and rightness please my heart just as meat pleases my palate.[14]

What is significant here is the connection of the concrete and the abstract through an analogy, for Mencius made use of physical perceptions of taste, sound, and sight as analogous to understanding abstract ideas of "reason and rightness." By establishing correspondences between two different domains of phenomena or situations, Mencius's argument exemplifies an associative or metaphorical way of philosophizing. Perhaps for some this is not real hard-core philosophy, but even in the West, cognitive science with its emphasis on concrete and empirical evidences has challenged metaphysical a priori abstractions. "The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical," George Lakoff and Mark Johnson declared rather categorically. "These are three major findings of cognitive science. More than two millennia of a priori philosophical speculation about these aspects of reason are over." They point out that philosophizing with bodily metaphorical argument is a challenge to Western thought and that "an empirically responsible philosophy would require our culture to abandon some of its deepest philosophical assumptions."[15] Perhaps we do not need to sound so dramatic, but what is needed is a more open-minded view of what counts as philosophy and in what different ways philosophical argument can be formulated. In other words, we need more sympathetic understanding of our common humanity with appreciation of our diversities.

The idea of a common and shared humanity, however, seems to be the bête noire for much of contemporary Western scholarship, in which difference is much more emphasized than similarities. Grounds for comparison have always been a nagging question put to all comparatists, and that question becomes even more importunate when it comes to East-West comparative literature as we put together texts, ideas, and expressions of very different cultures and traditions for comparison beyond the East/West divide. Indeed, can we put Plato and Zhuangzi together? Is Mencius's analogy of the drowning child comparable with Peter Singer's in modern ethics? These are challenging questions anyone doing East-West comparative literature is likely to face and, indeed, should ask oneself for a good answer. As Zhuangzi and Mencius are not exactly household names among most scholars and students in the West, one would expect that most people would not know how to answer these questions, but the fact is that many would quickly choose to answer them in the negative simply because they believe that East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet. In contemporary scholarship, respect for cultural difference is often deemed a morally commendable stance, but the denial of commonality can actually produce just the opposite of multicultural openness and pluralism, and the emphasis on difference can serve the purpose of racial segregation and discrimination. I completely agree with Lloyd when he says that "what we all share as humans is far greater than what differentiates us," but in an earlier period, "insistence on differences was repeatedly and disastrously used as a way of claiming superiority for certain groups and so in a perverse bid to try to justify the intolerance, persecution, and genocide perpetrated in the name of a master race."

This becomes clear when we go back to an earlier time, when Major General Lionel Charles Dunsterville, a British colonial officer in India and the first president of the Kipling Society, told his fellow Kipling

admirers in London in 1933 that Kipling was "an unswerving advocate of what we call, for want of a better word, Imperialism."[16] As the great imperialist poet, Kipling has articulated the fundamental differences between East and West, says Dunsterville. "Every single idea, every thread of heredity, of the oriental is—and it is right that it should be—diametrically opposed to the occidental mentality and heredity." Because of that diametrical opposition, Dunsterville resolutely objected to the idea of introducing a constitution to India, because he regarded constitution as a purely British and Western concept, completely beyond the oriental mentality and comprehension. "I wonder how the word 'constitution' is translated into Urdu," says a skeptic Dunsterville.[17] The world we now live in may be very different politically from Dunsterville's, but today we still find many avatars of his ideas, his emphasis on the fundamental differences of Eastern and Western mentalities, and his stress on untranslatability across languages and cultures. With influential theoretical concepts such as Thomas Kuhn's incommensurability of different paradigms, Michel Foucault's China as *heterotopia*, Jacques Derrida's *différance*, and so on, we find East-West dichotomy very much active and influential in discussions of cross-cultural issues. François Jullien published a book in 2000 with a title that articulates a thesis running throughout his numerous writings: *Penser d'un Dehors (la Chine): Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident*, in which he makes the argument that China "is, in effect, the only civilization that is recorded in substantial texts and whose linguistic and historical genealogy is radically non-European" and that "strictly speaking, *non-Europe* is China, and it cannot be anything else."[18] By looking at China as the reverse image of Europe, Jullien argues, the Westerner may have a better understanding of the Western self. Thus in Jullien's works, we often find two columns of contrastive concepts or categories, one Greek and the other Chinese, a neat dichotomy that always turns Jullien's China into the opposite of Greece, offering an unfailing confirmation of fundamental cultural differences.

Richard Nisbett published a book in 2003, also with a clear thesis title: *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why*, in which he states that "human cognition is not everywhere the same," that "members of different cultures differ in their 'metaphysics,' or fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world," and that "the characteristic thought processes of different groups differ greatly." The fundamental differences he presents come to nothing but an old stereotypical opposition between a "collective or interdependent nature of Asian society" and an "individualistic or independent nature of Western society."[19]

To test the validity of Nisbett's argument, let us look at a specific claim he made about the ancient Greeks. The Greeks, he declares, "more than any other ancient peoples, and in fact more than most people on the planet today, had a remarkable sense of personal *agency*—the sense that they were in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose. One definition of happiness for the Greeks was that it consisted of being able to exercise their powers in pursuit of excellence in a life free from constraints."[20] One may perhaps find some evidence to support such a robust view on life and happiness among the Greeks, but if Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* is any indication, the view expressed in that classic example of Greek tragedy is precisely a remarkable sense of the lack of personal agency, or the defeat of personal agency, for every act of his own free will but pushes him one step closer toward the fulfillment of his predestined tragic fate, from which he tries in vain to escape. "Oedipus confronts the mystery of being alive in a world that does not correspond to a pattern of order or justice satisfactory to the human mind," as Charles Segal argues. His is a tragic and absurd world where "the gods seem cruel or unjust, and life is hell."[21] Indeed, at the end of that play, the chorus sums up the Greek sense of destiny and expresses a notion of happiness totally different from what Nisbett describes as the Greek sense of personal agency, "the sense that they were in charge of their own lives":

Before that final day when one can say
his life has reached its end with no distress or grief,
no man should be called happy.[22]

Oedipus is, of course, not your average human being, but a man with extraordinary intellectual power to solve the notorious riddle of the Sphinx and political power to rule over Thebes as a good and responsible king. If we search ancient Greeks, real or fictional, in possession of "a remarkable sense of personal *agency*," Oedipus must be one of them. What makes it so tragic is that his powerful agency brings him not happiness as Nisbett describes, but his misery and downfall. There is a tragic sense of being trapped and played by a power far greater than any human agency, and that is at least an important part of the Greek outlook on life and their relationship with gods, a sense memorably articulated in another great tragedy by Shakespeare: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport."[23] Whether we understand Oedipus as with great power or without, we cannot call him a happy man, whose tragic fate belies Nisbett's generalization about the happy Greeks. We may find different interpretations of *Oedipus the King*, but none can be convincing without in some way acknowledging its tragic sense of "a mysterious doom or destiny, will of the gods."[24] The problem here is oversimplistic generalization about a whole people. If we do not find Nisbett convincing in his sweeping generalization about the ancient Greeks, how much trust can we possibly put in his incredibly more sweeping generalizations about all Asians and all Westerners? Isn't this a reincarnation of the old dichotomy of the oriental and occidental mentalities we have seen from an earlier period of time? Can we take such a huge East/West divide seriously?

In literary studies, the idea of untranslatability is widely discussed and very popular. Emily Apter's book, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, is a recent attempt to give the idea an artic-

ulation with philosophical and mystical ineffability as a model. So she mentions "Wittgenstein's nonsense, with its attendant lexicon of *das Unsagbare* (the Unsayable), and *das Unaussprechliche* (the Inexpressible) encountered in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* . . . where the nonsense of mysticism and metaphysics prevails."[25] She also refers to the "legislation against blasphemy or historic prohibitions on the vernacularization of sacred texts."[26] What Apter means by the untranslatable is thus first a philosophical aporia, a conceptual puzzlement, and then a religious notion, the sacred ineffable, the mystic negation of all language and communication, the unsayable and inexpressible Logos or God. In a way we return to Plato's philosophical letter and Zhuangzi's allegory of the wheelwright, but as I have argued elsewhere, "mystic silence, whether the religious or the linguistic kind, really generates a strong repressed desire to speak," and all mystics fall into an "ironic pattern," because while denying the use of language and speaking, they speak not less, but more, at the same time claiming to maintain the sacred silence of the ineffable.[27] "Even the innermost experience is not kept safe from the drive to expression," as Martin Buber also remarks, so the mystic "must speak, because the Word burns in him."[28] Such a burning desire to speak finds powerful articulations in literature, so poetry, as T. S. Eliot puts it, is "a raid on the inarticulate."[29] Silence becomes the very inspiration for poetic articulation, as Rainer Maria Rilke says beautifully: "Schweigen. Wer inniger schwieg, / rührt an die Wurzeln der Rede" (Be silent. Who keeps silent inside / touches the roots of speech).[30] But none of these is untranslatable, for the irony is that even the denial of language has to be articulated in language, and the apophatic "sacred silence" often becomes the inspiration for fantastic rhetorical fanfare in many mystic writings that are highly literary and poetic. The book of *Zhuangzi* is exemplary in precisely this regard, for it is a most poetic text with its beautiful metaphors, fascinating allegories, and provocative paradoxes, a text that has been valued as much for its literary values as

its philosophical insights. All these texts are of course difficult to translate, but none is untranslatable in the sense of impossible to be expressed in a different language and understood by readers outside its original linguistic and cultural milieu.

When applied to East-West comparative studies, the dogma of untranslatability can be annoyingly obtuse. I learned this firsthand many years ago when a reviewer of a book manuscript of mine challenged my translation of the several Chinese texts I quoted in the book. That reviewer first made a disclaimer that he did not know Chinese, but incredibly he went on to question my translation from the Chinese not because it was unreadable and did not make sense, but precisely because my translation read very smoothly in English. The reviewer assumed that Chinese as an oriental language must be very different from English and fundamentally untranslatable, so my readable English translation must have erased the radical foreignness of the foreign language and ignored its textual fissures and inconsistencies for the performance of a deconstructive reading. That reviewer's opinion is not just dogmatic and intellectually unjustifiable but is wittingly or unwittingly racist, because I do not think a Western scholar without the prerequisite linguistic expertise could comment on translations of French or German texts, but he felt perfectly qualified to comment on the translation of Chinese even without knowing a word of that language. In that reviewer's eyes, Chinese probably looked like mysterious hieroglyphs, exotic signs of an exotic language, totally incomprehensible, unsayable and inexpressible. And yet that reviewer's opinion carried such theoretical authority for the publisher that my book manuscript had to be withdrawn and was published later by another press. Ultimately, the argument of untranslatability is not just a challenge to East-West comparative studies, but the denial of the possibility of human understanding and communication.

Claudio Guillén was certainly right when he remarked, more than thirty years ago, that comparatists engaged in East-West studies "are

probably the most daring scholars in the field, above all from a theoretical point of view."[31] They are daring because East-West studies is a dangerous ground fools rush into only to be challenged not only by specialists on both sides, but also by those comparatists who are not willing to move beyond the comfort zone of European or Euro-American literatures, in which they feel adequately equipped to do the comparative work. In the earlier period of European comparative literature, Guillén observed, East-West comparative studies would not have been possible, and even at the time he was writing in the mid-1980s, "quite a number of scholars tolerate nongenetic studies of supranational categories with great distaste or scant enthusiasm."[32] If comparative literature by definition requires knowledge of not one, but at least two literary traditions, East-West studies requires knowledge of very different linguistic and literary traditions of a much wider scope, a "field" of study I always step into with a clear sense of how much more I don't know than what I do. Here I particularly like Daniel Smail's elegant expression in his essay (in this issue), with an echo of Socratic apology, that "as we contemplate the solemn majesty of knowledge, nothing is more certain than the depths of our own ignorance."[33] And yet, René Etiemble in the 1970s already called for comparatists to get out of European or Eurocentric limitations to study "Sanskrit, Chinese, Tamil, Japanese, Bengali, Iranian, Arabic or Marathi literatures," and even if that is an impossible dream, he called upon Western comparatists to engage in "the impossible" (A l'impossible, il est vrai, chacun de nous, je l'espère, se sent tenu).[34] In agreement with Etiemble, Guillén also encouraged comparatists to move toward that direction and considered East-West studies as "the most promising tendency in comparative literature."[35] East-West comparative studies is indeed promising with the possibility of new discoveries and new insights if only we are willing to venture into that vast and so far not yet sufficiently explored "field."

As an example, let me briefly discuss something belonging to comparative literature in the oldest sense, that is, the possible connections of different texts or sources. According to Ruth Bottigheimer, the story of Cinderella is "probably the world's most popular tale."[36] Early folklorist scholarship credited nameless national folks with the invention of fairy tales and their oral transmission, but modern scholars with knowledge of publishing history can trace the transmission of fairy tales in more tangible and reliable ways. Publishing history, says Bottigheimer, "now provides evidence for a beginning, and with it, a scaffolding for a new history of fairy tales."[37] By studying the many French texts and translations available in the German town of Cassel in the early nineteenth century, scholars now have concluded that Cinderella and many other fairy tales famously told by the Grimm brothers "were to a very large extent actually French, not *völkisch*, in origin."[38] In the French tradition, Charles Perrault in the late seventeenth century in turn reworked an earlier and more melodramatic Italian version by Giambattista Basile (1566–1632) and created the version well known in the modern world. By studying the German, French, and Italian connections, Bottigheimer declares that Cinderella "made its first appearance in Basile's collection."[39]

That is fine as far as European textual materials go, but from a wider perspective of East-West studies, we can find a much earlier version of the Cinderella story in a ninth-century Chinese collection of fantastic tales, Duan Chengshi's (803?–863) *Youyang zazu* (Miscellaneous morsels of Youyang), with all the essential elements of this fairy tale: a beautiful young girl suffers mistreatment by her stepmother; she goes to a party in a pair of "golden shoes," which are "light as hair and soundless when stepping on stones"; she loses one shoe in her haste to rush home; the king launches a search, and finally the happy ending when the girl is found whose foot fit the shoe, and she "walked in those shoes, as beautiful as a being from heaven."[40] In as early as 1947, the well-known Sinologist and translator Arthur Waley already introduced the Chinese

Cinderella story to Western scholarship, and he thought the story probably originated in aborigine communities in south China, though the name of the protagonist, Ye Xian 葉限, "certainly does not look like a Chinese girl's name."[41] More recently, the eminent Chinese translator Yang Xianyi observes that "this story is obviously the Cinderella story of the West." The girl is called in Chinese Ye Xian, which, Yang argues, is a transliteration of "the Anglo-Saxon *Aescen*, and the Sanskrit *Asan*," with the same meaning as the English Ashes. English versions of the story are mostly based on French texts, and Cinderella in English versions wears glass shoes. This is a mistranslation, says Yang, "because the French version has shoes made of hair (*vair*), which the English translator misunderstood as glass (*verre*). Though the Chinese version says 'golden shoes,' it also describes them as 'light as hair and soundless when stepping on stones,' so apparently they are originally made of hair."[42] How could the Cinderella story appear in a Chinese book as early as the ninth century? It is fascinating to imagine the trajectory of the story in its meandering journeys and adventurous transmissions. Here we are not interested in how the Chinese version predated the French Charles Perrault (1697) or the German Grimm brothers (1812) by almost a thousand years, and in any case the Chinese version originated in a foreign land to the west, probably India or the modern-day Middle East. What is fascinating is that peoples and cultures had such unexpected global connections way before our own time of globalization, and that cross-cultural exchange and communication happened much earlier and on a much larger scale than we might think.

There is always so much to learn and to know. Today we have a much better condition for East-West comparative studies as the world has become more connected as a "global village" and also as there is much more interest in the non-Western world and its literatures and cultures among Western scholars and students. At the same time, our world today is also suffering from much conflict and regional wars, humanitarian crises, massive numbers of displaced

people as exiles and migrants, the rise of religious fundamentalism, the threat of terrorism, and many other disasters stemming from the lack of tolerance and understanding, especially understanding across cultures, histories, and traditions. In a real sense, East-West comparative studies is not just an academic pursuit of knowledge but has particular relevance to our world and the way we live our lives. It is my strong belief that when the world pays more attention to the value of cross-cultural understanding beyond the fundamental differences of East and West, we will have a world that is not just better in understanding, but better in every sense.

Notes

Part of this essay was incorporated in the Sisir Kumar Das Memorial Lecture, delivered at the XIII Comparative Literature Association of India (CLAI) Biennial International Conference on March 6, 2017, at Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan, India.

1. Plato, "Letters: VII," 342b, trans. L. A. Post, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1589.

2. Ibid., 343a, 1590.

3. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, ed., *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 [The variorum edition of the Zhuangzi], in vol. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 [Collection of masters' writings], 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1954), chap. 13, *Tian dao* [The dao of heaven], 217. All translations from the Chinese are mine, and some cited French and German texts are also my translations.

4. Ibid., 218.

5. Plato, *Republic* IV, 428c, trans. Paul Shorey, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Hamilton and Cairns, 668.

6. Plato, *Statesman,* 293b, trans. J. B. Skemp, ibid., 1062.

7. Wang Bi 王弼 (226–49), *Laozi zhu* 老子注 [The annotated Laozi], chap. 25, in vol. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* [Collection of masters' writings], 56.

8. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), xvi.

9. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 231; quoted in Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 158.

10. See Plato, *Republic* VII, 514ff., in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, 747.

11. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 161.

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